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Proof Positive: **AGE IS JUST A NUMBER**

Marcel. Photo by Dynamic Dog Photos

I started taking agility classes six years ago after I retired, just to do something fun with my PBGV, Marcel. I had no intention of competing, but a couple of years later I was entering trials with Marcel. Then I had an opportunity to adopt Kai, a year-old Australian Shepherd whose owner had died. Now I was doing agility with two entirely different kinds of dogs and enjoying the challenges. This was making me work harder but become a better handler faster.

Because we live in an area where there are very few trials nearby, we travel two to four hours every other weekend to attend trials. This was definitely not how I envisioned my retirement, but I have to admit I'm having more fun now than at any other time of my life. What could be better than to be outdoors, playing with your dogs, getting exercise and using your brain? On top of that, I've met the nicest group of friends I can imagine who love to do the same thing I do.

When I started going to trials, I wondered if I would be the oldest competitor, but it didn't take me long to notice that agility enthusiasts come in all ages and I was not even close to being the oldest. I saw many people compete who were obviously in their 60s, 70s and 80s. I found this very encouraging since I love this sport and don't want to give it up anytime soon. Another thing I noticed was that most of the older handlers were very competent and seemed to have few problems keeping up with the younger crowd. I decided to talk to several to find out why they continued to do agility, how they stayed healthy enough to do it and what benefits they received from the sport.

Amy Brastad, 88 years old. The oldest person I found actively doing agility is 88-year-old Amy Brastad from San Jose, Calif. Her background was in obedience, but she started taking agility classes 12 years ago (yes, at the age of 76) with her Sheltie, Sophie. Soon after, she rescued a one-year-old Border Collie named Dasher and also competed with him. She is currently doing agility and obedience with her six-year-old Sheltie, Quill. Quill has his Agility Excellent (AX) title and his Master Excellent Jumpers with Weaves (MXJ). Quill also has two legs toward his Utility title in obedience. Amy takes agility classes twice a week, but doesn't trial as often as she would like because most of the trials are far away and she no longer drives long



distances. When I asked her why she does agility at her age, she said, "I love it! You have to keep moving in agility and it keeps me young." Amy exercises several times a week with an exercise tape to stay fit.

I saw Amy running with Quill at a trial last June and couldn't believe how well she could keep up with her Sheltie.



Jean Mitchell, 80 years old. Another 80-year-old still doing agility is Jean Mitchell, who lives on the California central coast in Nipomo. She bred Australian Shepherds for more than 30 years and was involved with conformation and obedience before agility. Jean started doing agility with her Aussies in 1998 by meeting weekly with a group of enthusiasts who, using the *Clean Run Workbook* series, worked on specific lessons because there was no formal training available in the area. Jean started trialing in 2000 in both ASCA and AKC and has put titles on five different dogs. She takes group lessons twice a week and private lessons two or three times a month. To stay in shape, Jean does cardio and resistance training three times a week. She also does a lot of gardening and stock dog training with her youngest Aussie, Lil Slade. Like Amy, Jean doesn't trial as often as she would like because she doesn't like to drive long distances.

Arnold McCullough, 74 years old. Arnold McCullough is a 74-year-old from Orange County who enters agility trials most weekends with his standard schnauzer, Maggee. Arnold and his wife, Joan, have been involved with dogs for more than 35 years and put many conformation and obedience titles on their dogs before they got interested in agility about 10 years ago. When Joan had to stop doing agility because of physical ailments, Arnold took over and put both MX and MXJ titles on their previous dog, Rocky, who didn't start his agility career until he was seven. "I plan on continuing with agility as long as I can physically get around the course. Who knows if that will be a few days or many years? If I stay healthy and don't break any bones, then I will try to earn a Masters Agility Champion (MACH) for Maggee," McCullough said.

When asked what he likes about agility, Arnold said, "I like agility because it is a challenge, mentally and physically, with each and every course." Explaining how he manages to compete against the younger competitors, Arnold said, "Since Maggee is very fast and I'm very slow, I am trying to get her to work farther and farther away from me." He teaches directional cues, Left, Right, Out and Go On, so she can race around the course no matter her handler's speed. Arnold works out in the gym three times weekly by doing

the treadmill and muscle-building exercises for both upper and lower body to help retain muscle that is naturally lost as we age.

Aljean Harmetz. Aljean Harmetz from Los Angeles describes herself as "well beyond Medicare age" but declines to state her exact age. I watched her run her 7-year-old Sheltie, Jason, in Excellent FAST, and saw her direct him into a particularly difficult tunnel entrance from a great distance. Most of the other competitors had failed to gain the correct tunnel entrance, but Jason did it with no hesitation. She explained her philosophy: "I think one of the most important things an older handler

has to do is train her dog to work at a distance. No matter how strong the spirit, the legs can't compete with handlers 20-to-40-years younger. Having a dog that works away from you shrinks that disadvantage." Jason has his ADCH Bronze in USDAA and his MACH in AKC.

Aljean's preferred venue is USDAA. Her Sheltie, Marlowe, who died in 2009, was the first Sheltie to get a USDAA Platinum Lifetime Achievement Award. He also had his MACH in AKC. Besides currently running Jason, Aljean is training a 14-month-old Sheltie rescue to do agility. A former reporter for the *New York Times* and author of four books on the movies, Aljean plans to stay busy doing agility as long as she can.

Laura Turner, 72 years old. Laura Turner looks much younger than her 72 years. She has been entering agility competitions since 2003 but only recently has been entering them regularly. She has two Cairn terriers, 10-year-old Maggie and 5-year-old Twister. She admits that it isn't always easy working with terriers that are often distracted by their environment, but prefers to stay with dogs that she enjoys. Both Maggie and Twister compete in AKC Excellent. I asked Laura why she spends so much of her spare time doing agility (she trains three to five days a week and attends trials a couple of times a month). She smiled and said, "Because I love agility. If it were about qualifying, I would have quit a long time ago! I know of few things that give more pleasure than training and competing with my dogs. It is physically and mentally good for the dogs and me. People involved in the sport are, for the most part, fun and affirming, and the bond that you build and share with your dog is deeply rewarding."

Patty Wiederman, 64 years old. Patty Wiederman, 64, from Southern California, was the youngest agility enthusiast I interviewed. She does agility with her three "Dream Team" Chinese Cresteds, Taylor, Fairway and Chip, who have all qualified and competed at the AKC Agility Invitational since it started in 2006. In 2009, Taylor made it into the finals, finishing 7th overall in the 8-in. jump height and was on *Animal Planet*. Taylor has her MACH8, Fairway has her MACH6 and Chip has his *continued on page 37*